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Watching the CIA

The question is not whether the Central Intelligence Agency is to have a continuing check on it by some congressional group but rather who is to compose the group. At present, there are in fact two separate Senate subcommittees, one from the Appropriations Committee and the other from the Armed Services Committee which meet together informally to review CIA activities and budgets. Understandably—and properly—the nine men on these two subcommittees are a closed-mouth group. They employ no staff. They say no more about what they know of CIA work than does the agency itself. And this is the way Senator Russell, the senior member, wants to keep it.

Is this a good enough arrangement? More and more serious challenges to the system are arising, and with good reason. While the Bay of Pigs fiasco offers perhaps the most dramatic illustration of faulty judgment by the CIA (and other agencies) more recent evidence of CIA activities within this country have raised broad questions of policy. The admitted activities of the CIA in sponsoring undercover but public denunciation of an Estonian refugee, which has resulted in the slander suit now being tried before a Federal court in Baltimore, and the exploitation of university resources, have raised serious doubts over major policy and the constitutionality of its domestic operations.

To supplant the present arrangement, a resolution offered by Senator Eugene McCarthy would establish a formal Senate committee, also of nine men, but including representation from the Foreign Relations Committee as well as

from the Armed Services and Appropriations committees. It would be empowered to employ a professional staff, although it would not have to do so. The result, the sponsors of the resolution hope, would be to tighten congressional oversight of one of the most important and delicate operations in which the executive branch of the Government engages.

There is no suggestion here that any congressional committee should substitute its necessarily lay judgment for the professional wisdom of the CIA itself or of the President in any particular case. But such an arrangement would presumably insure a closer degree of supervision over broad policy. It would bring some representative of the Foreign Relations Committee into the process of review. And it would enable responsible and influential members of Congress to consult with the President on a better informed basis when danger signals began to fly. Given the valid criticisms and questions which have arisen about CIA operations, some such tightening of the supervisory process seems clearly in order.